

A Call to the Future

A 650-page study on Auroville’s organization, made by Professor Raag Yadava and his team, has been published. It is available on the Auroville website. In this issue we publish excerpts from the concluding note of this study, as well as an interview with Prof. Yadava.

Till that is reached our journeying cannot cease.
Sri Aurobindo, Savitri

The city already exists.
Mother, April 23, 1966, Mother’s Agenda

This is a framework study that paints a broad-picture perspective of Auroville’s vision, growth and development, identifying key areas of progress and challenges for the future. In doing so, we navigate between Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s ideals, understood in the background of global urban movements and the empirical picture. The spiritual ideal, represented not just symbolically, but physically, in the concentration of Mother’s force palpable in the Matrimandir – the construction of which represents a singularly important achievement of Auroville – served as a constant reminder of the path to be trod.

While great progress has been made in establishing the physical base for the city by pioneering and exemplary green works over the past fifty years, with a notable outreach architecture in the bio-region, the vital infrastructure – represented in services, housing, economy etc. – and mental infrastructure – represented in research, collective planning, institutional coordination etc. – are works in progress, proceeding unsystematically at a rather slow pace. While there are several widely acclaimed enterprises developed through individual initiative, collectively, the records show a stagnation, or creative inertia, particularly in urban infrastructure development, socio-economic planning and population growth. Many opportunities have been missed in the process. This is particularly so since the 2001 Perspective Master Plan. Most development goals in the document are yet to be met, and in some sectors, work is yet to start. The causes for this stagnation are varied, from ability (lack of funding, human resources and expertise) to willingness (adherence to the status quo, altered incentive structures to build and a dilution of the vision) and prolonged internal disagreements, demonstrating a lack of unity.

It would be naïve to think that the imperfections of human nature, our characteristic humours and tempers, would not be reflected in Auroville’s collective. On the contrary, Auroville must contain a vast catalogue of problems, representative of our collective ills, for it to be the ‘city the Earth needs.’ They are part of the evolutionary game Auroville is to play:

There is a purpose in each stumble and fall;
Nature’s most careless lolling is a pose
Preparing some forward step, some deep result,
Ingenious notes plugged into a motived score,
These million discords dot the harmonious theme
Of the evolution’s huge orchestral dance.

Auroville’s establishment, early pioneering efforts and, indeed, its continued existence despite formidable challenges are a miracle. This owes to a host of Aurovilians whose boldness, imagination and selfless dedication to the work serve to inspire. Yet, as in any project of this scale and ambition, it is one that requires rejuvenation to prepare for the next stage of growth. Our analysis of governance structures suggests pathways for reform. These include:

- i. Defined procedural rules for channelized and informed decision-making within a bicameral Residents’ Assembly, divided between a Council of Residents and a Council of the Wise.
- ii. Developing confederated decision-making models at the sub-zonal and zonal levels, with subsidiarity-based financial allocations for zonal action.
- iii. Strengthening the executive mandate of the Zonal Groups and sub-zonal bodies. (SAIIR, ABC, ABS etc.)
- iv. Instituting legislative Zonal Assemblies, with representation to the Residents’ Assembly.
- v. Developing an independent channel in the ‘Unity Committee’ for evaluation and monitoring.
- vi. Instituting a commonly constituted Steering Group across the three statutory bodies for external evaluation and monitoring.
- vii. Restructuring the selection, operation and evaluation mechanisms of Working Groups for expert-led and expert-constituted bodies as opposed to a popular vote under the Participatory Working Groups Selection Guidelines, with provisional selection contingent on drafting a commonly-agreed upon work plan.
- viii. A restructuring of the current mandates of the TDC, FAMC and other Working Groups for manageable, efficient and accountable working, along the proposed framework.
- ix. Extending Working Group term limits.
- x. Developing defined, robust and time-bound community

consultation platforms to allow for effective, but not inflated, participation, with decision-making resting with the Working Group along the principle of ‘illuminated hierarchies.’

- xi. A defined separation of legislative and executive powers between the Residents’ Assembly and Working Groups.
- xii. Developing a common administrative, managerial and human resources pool for Working Groups.
- xiii. Instituting advisory boards for each Working Group to leverage external expertise and termly reports to the Unity Committee for mid-term accountability.
- xiv. Developing a city-wide continuous digital learning platform embedded in each sector for learning and informed decision-making.
- xv. Developing a tiered, easy access dispute resolution mechanism, along the proposed framework.
- xvi. Rationalizing / streamlining / codifying policies, codes of conduct, regulations, rules, office and standing order, customs in plain language.
- xvii. Developing a city-wide governance dashboard with an independent data collection and statistics cell to effectively conduct the complex task of city-development.

Solvitur Ambulando

Constructing a city dedicated to the Divine is the work of an age – the great efforts of the past that have brought Auroville to where it is today are a springboard to the ‘great adventure’ of the future. The pioneering days, particularly with Mother at the helm, placed Auroville at the forefront, materially and spiritually. But this status is not guaranteed today. Much remains to be done in all sectors, and in many, beginnings are yet to be made.

This view was shared by many in the community: ‘there is a tremendous thirst for change, for movement forward based upon our ideals.’ We were met in conversations with a refreshing and timely self-reflective poise that Auroville is at an inflection point for the next stage of its growth. It needs a conscious re-alignment with the vision where deviations or dilutions have occurred. Renewed energy and idealism matched with concrete and practical steps for this next stage can allow for a conscious gathering of energies to propel the city forward. Equally, a spirit of mutuality between the three statutory bodies, the Residents’ Assembly, Governing Board and International Advisory Council, is indispensable going forward.

Building Mother’s city is a difficult and joyous task, ‘rich with life’s adventure and delight’, much as was the construction of the Matrimandir. The majestic spiritual vision, a culmination of terrestrial evolution through the descent of the supramental, is at once irresistible in its logic yet elusive to our immediate grasp, and the mode of practice disarmingly simple yet demanding. For this, Auroville must naturally tailor-make its own developmental model through robust research and experimentation; yet, it seems to be in a prolonged intermediate stage where the old has been rejected, but the new is yet to be found. In this, inertia and timidity have settled in. An openness to developments elsewhere, a cross-fertilization with emerging streams of thought, as also an invitation for others to participate and bring fresh energy into the system, is helpful to move the city forward and importantly, avoid entrenchment and an unhelpful negative self-definition (‘we are not what the others are’). As is the vitality of bold actions and experimentation, to ‘grow ... with the full play of the unexpected’, offered in an aspiration to the ideal, which ‘builds in ignorance the steps of light’. This spirit of undeterred, intense action, whether it leads to immediate success or failure, is the material offering for the growth of the inner flame of Auroville. As Sri Aurobindo wrote in *The Human Cycle*:

Failures must be originally numerous in everything great and difficult, but the time comes when the experience of past failures can be profitably used and the gate that so long resisted opens.

The point, as Mother often noted, is to make the attempt. There is perhaps no better inspiration than the unhindered promise and vitality infused in these lines in *Savitri*:

The nude god-children in their play-fields ran
Smiting the winds with splendour and with speed;
Of storm and sun they made companions,
Sported with the white mane of tossing seas
Slew distance trampled to death under their wheels
And wrestled in the arenas of their force.

In this spirit, while off-the-shelf solutions may not be apparent in all sectors, immediate actions need not be held hostage: ‘the motto of the aspirant’s endeavour must be the *solvitur ambulando* of the discoverer. For by the doing the difficulty will be solved.’ In this vein of solving by doing (and not talking), discrete projects that generate broad, even if not uniform, consensus can be acted upon immediately and with a sense of urgency to generate a helpful momentum.



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Success is certain, but ...

It was telling that most discussants agreed to most development priorities identified in this study and urged strong action. Yet, a common feature across our research was a lack of unity, a frustration with the collective and a felt blocking of energies, almost arithmetically so with each idea receiving an equal and opposite pull. This is not a new problem. In a long conversation dated March, 1972, Mother diagnosed the problem and suggested a cure:

Yes, yes, yes – yes, exactly. Exactly! Instead of a combination where each one has his place within a harmonious unity, instead of that, everyone pulls in his own direction ... You have hit the point: lack of unity is the cause of all the difficulties ...

Auroville is ‘decreed’ and ‘success is certain.’ But ‘on one condition – ONE condition’:

... that we become united. Supposedly, we are preaching unity to the world – it would be only decent to do it ourselves! Instead, we are the example of exactly the opposite. To visitors we say, “Here we seek human unity”; but WE constantly quarrel among ourselves, and we preach human unity! That’s absurd. Totally absurd! We can’t even be ONE in our own work.

Resolving these contrary pulls is inevitable in Sri Aurobindo’s evolutionary scheme of things – the question is whether Auroville does it swiftly or slowly, with more or less pain in the process. Recent disagreements over Auroville’s governance, many of which are before the courts, have divided the community and surfaced latent tensions for resolution. This presents a necessary churn, an infusion of energy to reflect on past problems and ‘spring boldly to the future’ together – ‘if the heart were not forced to want and weep / his soul would have lain down content, at ease.’ As Sri Aurobindo reminds us:

Often the decisive turn is preceded by an apparent emphasising and raising to their extreme of things which seem the very denial, the most uncompromising opposite of the new principle and the new creation.

To conclude, we note that Mother once said that Auroville has ‘the possibility of a breathtaking success.’ This possibility, unrealized still, can be palpably felt in the atmosphere. As urbanization peaks and the evolutionary crisis deepens, the world needs a city like Auroville to lead the New Creation. Manifesting it requires a collective effort, a bold and playful one, for which finding that unity and fraternity is now key.

Rich-hearted, wonderful to each other met
In the mutual marvelling of their myriad notes
And dwelt like brothers of one family
Who had found their common and mysterious home.

Raag Yadava
Nidhi Harihar

A framework study for Auroville

An interview with lead author Professor Raag Yadava

AVToday: Raag, how did you get involved in this study?

Raag Yadava: I was invited by Dr. Jayanti Ravi, Secretary to the Foundation. The idea was to do a past-present-future framework perspective study on how governance mechanisms in Auroville have evolved over the years and to see what could be pathways forward. This was an independent study, conducted *pro bono*. I had a team of three wonderful research associates, Rajesh Subburaj, Andleeb Shadab and Nidhi Harihar. Nidhi is also my co-author.

What was your modus operandi?

There were three stages. The first was archival work to understand the history of how governance frameworks evolved from 1968 till 2023. The second stage involved doing semi-structured interviews with the members of some 23 working groups and approximately 80 residents. And the third stage was to map all this to the conceptual architecture provided by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

How is the study structured?

There are five parts. The first part outlines Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s spiritual and socio-political vision, particularly the terrestrial and communal yoga, which set their works apart from previous traditions. Part two details Mother’s views on Auroville’s urban aspirations in the background of global urban movements, in terms of density, agglomeration dynamics, migration, environmental questions and so on. The third part presents an empirical overview of Auroville’s growth, to identify challenges and development priorities across seven sectors. These are urban infrastructure development, land acquisition, housing, regional and outreach planning, education and research, commerce and economy and agriculture. The fourth part maps this empirical picture onto the philosophical architecture of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, to suggest governance reforms. Then there is a fifth part, which considers the Auroville Foundation Act.

In the economy sector, what were your findings?

The largely labour-intensive profile of the commercial sector, with limited capitalization, means that some structural changes to the economy are needed to keep Auroville sustainable, if not to grow. “Sustainable” means two things: the first is providing Aurovilians with a moderate level of maintenance, whether through a universal or linked prosperity package or otherwise. The current Auroville maintenance hovers around and is sometimes less than the Tamil Nadu minimum wage. The second is that a cottage industry set-up will not generate the capital intensity or surplus you need to sustain the vast catalogue of city-building works. Even if you double the number of commercial units you have today, but keep the same commercial profile, you will not get there. This has resulted in a cyclical stagnation – low population numbers and an under-capitalized commercial sector, leading to insufficient investment in housing, social and research infrastructure, leading to slow growth rates and so on.

So, Auroville will have to do some careful, strategic thinking going forward. The 2017 Code of Conduct currently places a heavy compliance burden on enterprises, with limited credit facilities and regulatory control over operational matters. This is not conducive to entrepreneurial work. This is compounded by the legal hurdles under the Foundation Act. We propose ways around these constraints to diversify the economic profile, with independently incorporated legal entities capable of taking on debt, a streamlined regulatory structure for oversight but not control, all to focus on developing a knowledge economy in catalytic sectors that is entrepreneurial and research-intensive. Relying on donations is alright as a short-term matter but it is not a viable long-term strategy.

Has the Auroville commercial sector developed as was initially envisaged?

No, it hasn’t. Early planning documents envisaged that 60 % of the working population would be in the tertiary sector, 10% in cottage industries and 5% in agriculture. But currently Auroville has a small-scale (micro) commercial sector with a labour-intensive profile. If Auroville is meant to be a research and innovation intensive society, substantial prior investments have to be made in catalytic sectors, such as green manufacturing, computing, information technology, medical science and technology and renewables, in order to create clusters which can attract talented newcomers and capital investment. There are legal, taxation and regulatory challenges, but they are eminently solvable. The most important thing is to have the collective will to act and to act decisively.

Economic development goes hand-in-hand with population increase. You also studied this sector. What are your findings?

There are many plans here. You have Anger’s 1969 population projection which Mother approved; you have the projection in the Master Plan for 15,000 people by 2010, followed up by the 2003 Directions for Growth report. Later you have the 2013 Land Suitability and Land Use Proposal and the TDC’s 2014 projection for a 114% population increase. None translated into actionable plans. At the current rate, it would take 945 years to reach 50,000 residents.

Growing numbers is not important for the sake of it, but for two reasons. The first is that Auroville’s aspirations to sustain-ability, in which tremendous work has been done in afforestation, are dented by the urban sprawl that exists today. The second is to activate clustering dynamics that make an urban environment what it is.

Here you would have a high density of people conducting concentrated advanced research work in different fields, benefitting from each other’s presence, engaging the economies of scale, adding more colour and energy to the cultural life of the city. Auroville is tiny right now, with 3000 people, which brings diseconomies of scale. All sorts of opportunities are missed at this small scale. Of course, higher density will also attract problems – greater chances of conflict, higher resource use and spatial justice issues. But these are precisely the challenges that Mother wanted Auroville to solve, to develop a new urban archetype. If Auroville can do that, it will be a great inspiration, ‘*the City the Earth needs.*’

We make several suggestions here, but I can mention two. The first is to build entry-level Newcomer housing, to attract a young demographic. There are proposals for loans from HUDCO, third-party housing development, the Section 24 borrowing power under the Foundation Act against outlying lands, grants for research-linked accommodation and so on that offer easy pathways. They can be acted upon with speed. The vicious cycle of housing shortages leading to low growth and so on has to be broken. At the same time, for Newcomers who invest their own savings to build a house, a reasonable exit option also has to be worked out as an expression of mutual trust. An inner offering to the Divine is not the same as a legal offering to a public authority, and it is natural for people to be a bit wary.

The second is to be proactive in getting the word out. Auroville should never market itself, but it must have a strategic, targeted and sensitive outreach process to invite others who are aligned. The ideal of Auroville is deeply enticing for the progressive youth of the country and the world: a city dedicated to building a green and beautiful urban environment, where one can have a simple yet comfortable material life and focus on cutting-edge research in a cosmopolitan community setting. So targeted outreach through research exchanges, fellowships and partnerships with aligned institutions is a good way to attract people but also secure a strong gatekeeping function to guard the cultural environment. In general, Auroville needs to maintain a daily contact with India and the rest of the world across sectors. It should be a hub of research activity, not a remote destination in south India. The world needs to know that Auroville is a place for intensive research, in agriculture and urban planning, in the arts and sciences, in energy and computing, in medicine and governance. So much of the hard work to develop this beautiful green haven has been done. Now is the time for some smart, strategic work to leverage the immense untapped potential.

You also focused on Auroville education. Can you mention some of your findings in this sector?

I can share two short points. The first is schooling and the second is tertiary education and research. For schooling, the history is important. In 2002, the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Educational Research (SAIER) obtained Central Government Plan Grant funding. A Visiting Committee visited Auroville the year before and had written a wonderful report praising the work. They wanted to set up seven research faculties and SAIER was to engage in research and publication in curriculum development and pedagogical experimentation as a way to help the rest of the country. That was how funding started flowing in. But none of these things actually took off. Auroville’s schools are doing interesting work, but research translation, publication and extension work needs a fresh impetus. The question is: what can Auroville schooling do for the rest of the country, if not the world?

Currently, this isn’t priority for most schools, either because of time, daily burdens of work or research capacity or temperament. One feels for them, but the sector has to build capacity for a strong reflective culture to develop a body of knowledge that synthesizes daily learnings into a whole. When this does happen, you get wonderful results like the *Awareness Through the Body* curriculum, the *Building with Blocks* curriculum, the work by the Institute for Applied Technology and so on. Each school currently operates as an island, and so the benefits of collective reflection, research and peer-review are being missed out. This is also why the development of the Education Loop is an urgent need, to catalyze a beautiful, concentrated atmosphere when teachers, students and researchers are mingling. The spatial element is important here.

I will also mention here that Auroville is at a point where it can setup a Free Progress Education Board, as an alternate to the CBSE, ICSE or IB curricula. It will be a beautiful offering to the rest of the country, which sorely needs this. It will not only give a push for Auroville to synthesize learnings and develop a body of research in healthy exchange with other progressive schooling environments, but also generate a long-term income stream given the dependence on government grants.

Then there is the second question of developing a tertiary research infrastructure across disciplines in the Cultural and International Zones. This is the *raison d’être* of Auroville, teeming with unrealized potential. One option to consider is a free-progress multi-disciplinary university framework embedded into the city, to provide an institutional form to the ideal of unending education. This has the most significant potential to catalyze change, in terms of attracting aligned Newcomers, generating a meaningful source of income and, most importantly, developing Auroville, as Mother wanted, into ‘*the greatest seat of knowledge upon Earth.*’ Auroville has a long way to go, but the slow pace of movement is worrying.

A major part of your study deals with Auroville’s internal organization.

If a city of the ambition of Auroville is to be built, the governance architecture will need some careful recalibration. It’s a fas-

cinating question – it’s not a reductive affair of drawing up organograms, process maps or codes of conduct. Governance reflects how parts relate to the whole, how each resident relates to the collective. It’s the practical side of the communal yoga, particularly in its element of power. We are drawn to the Divine’s aspects of Love, Wisdom and Beauty, but that of Power is usually most corrupting, most resisted. I suspect that is why the residents have long avoided centralized authorities in Auroville. You can delay it, but you cannot avoid it.

In a sense, Auroville is still at a nascent stage in its internal organization. There is a strong culture of small-group democracy with no less than 53 working groups since 2001. But the institutional forms and processes are yet to reach maturity. There is a conflation of legislative and executive powers, unstructured participation that ends up leading to exhaustion rather than action, a vague regulatory frame, weak enforcement and accountability mechanisms and insufficiently strong centralization. You end up with a network of loosely organized, semi-autarchic nodes, each pulling in its own direction. I should say, this organic versus planned development debate that is common fare in Auroville is a bit of a false dichotomy – organisms grow iteratively according to plans. Sri Aurobindo outlines this movement, from early organicity to sensitive rationalization, in which he proposes federated models to allow for the collectivistic and individualist tendencies to be harmonized. We try and map that onto Auroville. I can mention two proposals.

The first is a representative, bicameral and federated structure for the Residents’ Assembly (RA). Having a single assembly of 3000 people or more is either going to be an exhausting cacophony or a disguised oligarchy. We propose instead Zonal and sub-Zonal Assemblies, one for each of the six Zones of the city, if you include the Peace Area and the Green Belt, plus the four zones. Each Zone alongside has a Zonal Group, which is the executive arm of these legislative assemblies. Under the Zonal Group, you have sub-zonal bodies working in specific areas within that zone. The Zonal Assemblies would have authority to decide on policy matters over their zone. Each zone selects members to represent it in the RA, which deals with issues concerning Auroville as a whole. For each of the Assemblies, we also suggest a bicameral setup, with a Council of Residents and a ‘Council of the Wise.’ This will raise eyebrows, but bicameralism allows for stronger, more level-headed decision-making.

The second is to do with the selection and accountability processes for the Working Groups. Working Groups are executive bodies, not legislative ones, which require professional competence, not popularity. This is not reflected in the current setup, which is an anonymous, group-based popular vote with a part ‘lottocracy’. We propose to migrate to an expert-constituted body that selects Working Groups against demonstrated competence and an agreed upon work plan decided prior to, not after, appointment.

The idea is for the Zonal Assemblies to lay down policies, where robust debate takes place, and for the Working Groups to be empowered to implement those policies in a defined time-frame. Historically, Working Groups have had large mandates and truncated powers, waiting for universal consensus: Waiting for Godot, really. Twenty-two years on from the Master Plan, a Detailed Development Plan is yet to be drafted. Power to implement goes along with accountability and strong participatory processes. But cumbrous conversations and more groups are not going to get us there. Mother, like many others, was no fan of assemblies. Numbers don’t guarantee truth. In that vein, we suggest ways to secure meaningful participation at the zonal and sub-zonal levels, where your voice can really matter. Doing without talking is rash and undemocratic, but talking without doing is worse. Here, accountability is ensured by an oversight body, which we call the Unity Committee, that checks if work plans are being followed and that the Working Groups are accountable to the residents.

Our organizational suggestions may help channelize energies but, ultimately, it is the collective consciousness that will dictate matters. You cannot think up a wonderful governance architecture and then say, ‘Okay, this is how we will do things.’ It simply will not work, least of all in Auroville. The forms have to emerge from within the community to be living practices rather than dead letter systems.

What about the organization as prescribed in the Auroville Foundation Act?

What emerges is that the primary trusteeship of Auroville lies with the residents. In the ideal, the Governing Board can guide, oversee, regulate, approve, but not determine, with the International Advisory Council keeping both bodies true to the Charter. But here Sri Aurobindo places a caveat: if the *demos* is loosely organized or deviates from purpose, a centralizing push will be needed. Sri Aurobindo anticipates a swinging of the pendulum, which he calls ‘an inevitable and fruitful conflict.’ Ultimately, an equilibrium has to be found. We suggest a triply constituted Steering Group for city-level matters that require their collective wisdom and power, and a system of dual but distributed accountability of Working Groups to the Governing Board and the Residents’ Assembly.

A ‘handholding’ and many discussions will be needed to understand and implement this study, or parts of it. Are you and your team members ready to step in and help us through?

Of course, it would be privilege. I hope the spirit of playfulness, and I mean that in the deepest sense of the term, prevails in the community, to act boldly and take risks. It’s time to move forward and to do it together.

In conversation with Carel

"I am here because of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo"

Mr. Srinivasmurthy was a member of the Auroville Foundation administration for the last 28 years, serving many different Secretaries and fulfilling different roles. Now in premature retirement, he shares his views on Auroville's relationship with the government and the challenges he has encountered.

Auroville Today: How did you come to Auroville?

Srinivasamurthy: My connection with the Ashram preceded my coming to Auroville. My family was not devotees but I was in search of something higher, spiritual, and I discovered the Ashram in 1984. I was not really a devout type but when I visited Ashram for the first time, I felt something very beautiful there. Then my cousin used to speak about The Mother often so, within a few months, I was drawn in. At one point I even thought of joining the Ashram, but Shri M.P. Pandit, who was my guide in the Ashram, said I needed to follow a different path.

But I kept the contact. For many years, I attended youth camps run by the Sri Aurobindo Society. One of the things we did every year was to cycle to Auroville, where we would visit the Matrimandir and different communities like the Matrimandir gardens, Auromodèle, Promesse and Aurombrindavan.

In 1995, I was about to take my final Chartered Accountancy exams, so I phoned up the Ashram to receive blessings. I was told by my friend from the Ashram that Auroville was looking for a Finance Officer. Was I interested? I decided to apply, even though I was not fully qualified for the post. However, I was invited for an interview. The interviewing panel asked me if I had government organisational experience. I said 'no' but I was aware of the governmental norms. Then the Secretary, Dr.S.C. De, asked me if I was a follower of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and I said 'yes'. But, he said, their teachings are universal and can be followed from anywhere, so why do you want to come to Auroville? I said it's because I feel their presence is concentrated here and I don't feel like living anywhere else.

Over the past 28 years you have worked with many different Secretaries, and, meanwhile, your job description changed. Was all this very challenging?

I've worked with six different Secretaries, learning a lot, all of whom had different ways of working, while my job description turned out to be an open-ended one. Initially, I thought I would only deal with finance and audit, but soon I was given more and more administrative jobs. After three or four years I informed the then Secretary that a Finance Officer signing many administrative documents, like certificates for visa registration, may not be appropriate. So my designation was changed to Finance and Administrative Officer. Then my work became more administrative and assisting in general superintendence, which I found more interesting than finance and accounts.

But there were also times when you were Acting Secretary.

Within six months of joining Auroville as Finance Officer, I became Secretary in-charge. I was hardly 31 years old, but I wasn't overawed as I thought, in my enthusiasm, the job didn't require a very senior officer to do it. Today I still feel the same, though for different reasons.

Having said that, I think if we – and I speak of myself as an Aurovilian at heart – do have a senior IAS or IPS officer as Secretary, they have something more to contribute because of their vast experience. They would be able to handle the bureaucracy and all the government agencies much better than we could. In fact, recently I was asked to apply for the Secretary's post before the present incumbent joined, but I refused because I have grown up here and my way of looking at things is 'homegrown', whereas they have a broader perspective and better experience.

But perhaps your 'homegrown' knowledge would have been important in this post. After all, for the government Auroville is a very strange animal: it doesn't fit in any of the usual boxes.

It doesn't fit into any of the existing categories. I don't think any of the central government organizations, except, though not really comparable, Shantiniketan, have anything to do with true human unity or spiritual objectives, even remotely.

In fact, one of the senior-most government Secretaries asked Mr. Bala Baskar, "Why is the government meddling with institutions like Auroville? We don't take over places like this." Then Mr Bala Baskar had to explain that actually

Auroville had invited the government in.

But it raises the question of whether somebody who is government trained can understand a place like Auroville.

I think government officials can be helpful but they need some kind of good briefing to understand a place like this.

Given your long experience here, were you able to offer guidance to Foundation Secretaries? And were they ready to receive it?

Most of the previous Secretaries used to ask me what I thought, and I could give my suggestions. On occasions, I could help in toning things down if I thought they were going too strong or were planning things which didn't quite fit the ambience of Auroville. But I wasn't always successful, which is why Mr. Bala Baskar, who has great maturity and wisdom, said the first thing we in the Foundation office have to do is to ensure that the Aurovilians have confidence in us. Before he came, the community had experienced problems with some of the previous Secretaries.

Did you notice a difference in approach between those Secretaries who were close to retirement or had retired already and those who were still career-oriented?

Very much so. Serving officers are keen to get things done because they are only here for a short while and have to show things done as achievements when they leave. So my advice to the community has always been to keep a list of things that you want to get done – the help you need from Delhi, Chennai, regarding protection, the land etc. – so that the Secretary can concentrate upon these issues rather than focusing on other things.

My constant refrain was, don't expect government officers to do yoga. We should be practitioners of yoga but these standards should not be applied to them. We should see them as officials who have been sent here to do a certain job, or to facilitate development. That's important, because certain situations can only be handled by a representative of the government.

But sometimes there was the impression that some Secretaries already came with an agenda or with a preconceived, but inaccurate, perception of what they thought Auroville is about, and this has resulted in clashes. So how do you think these situations should be handled?

Each IAS officer who comes here is totally different, so you have to expect the unexpected. But if you have a certain clarity about what you need, you can pursue on these lines rather than engage in philosophical debates. However, there has to be some give and take. You may want a, b, and c, but if they say the first one is not possible, concentrate on getting the others.

The Mother wrote that it's impossible for any outside agency or organization to run Auroville. Do you think this points to a fundamental mismatch between how any outside organization operates and what Auroville is setting out to do? After all, control is a very big part of what any government seeks to establish while freedom is a very important aspect of the Auroville experiment.

I think there is a mismatch at a certain level. You're quite right that the governmental approach is different and Auroville wants a lot of freedom to function, so how do we balance this in the interim? In an ideal scenario the government would not be here because we would be governing ourselves, and I firmly believe this will happen in the future. But we are not there yet, and we have a lot to learn.

For worldly and external relations we have to be logical and practical, and we have to understand the functioning of government and outside organisations. This was why I requested Professor Kireet Joshi that we should let Aurovilians work in the Foundation office in order to train them on how to deal with the government. In this way I believe we can equip ourselves to be able to self-govern in future.



Srinivasamurthy

I have faith that the government may withdraw once they feel that here in Auroville there is a semblance of management and an organisational structure that can not only protect the ideals but will also not allow it to become a problem for the government.

Past governments had a certain 'light-handed' approach to Auroville. But there is a perception that this government's relationship to Auroville may be different, that it wants to exercise more control over what happens here. Do you feel this?

Yes, there has been a change. There is a lot of goodwill towards Auroville from the present government and they have been good to us, but there is definitely a great urgency now to get the house in order.

We tend to assume they should listen to us because we are living here, so we know best. Is this one of the problems when it comes to relating to the government?

Yes. The harsh reality is that Auroville has taken very strong positions in their approach or responses to the government. The way we treat the officers, the way we react to them, is seen as indicative of people we have in Auroville. If we challenge the authority, it will be seen as some kind of institution which is misbehaving.

Often, in fact, our obstinacy has made things worse. Some years ago, three Auroville youth refused to apologise to an important man who felt he had been attacked or insulted by them. They refused because they said they had not done anything wrong. But the upshot was that they were sent out of India. So what was achieved by their refusal to apologise? I would like to think that such situations are avoidable. Even though we feel we are right, if we apologise sincerely the problem is usually resolved or intensity mitigated.

But if you feel you are unjustly accused and you are asked to apologise, in effect you are saying that the accusation was correct.

I agree, this is an ethical dilemma. In a similar situation, following what I would call the traditional Indian or spiritual way, I would apologise, even if the person who accuses me is not a saint or I think the accusation is unjust. Because we are not yet saints ourselves! Besides, we do not have the legal and financial wherewithal to go through the whole legal process to prove that we are right.

We don't have to compromise our beliefs, but to choose our battles wisely so that even if we lose a battle we can win the war. In situations like this, our main objective should be that we do not want external forces to interfere into Auroville. Kireetbhai knew this well, which is why he went and apologised personally to the man who felt he had been insulted in that case of the Auroville youth.

At times, I thought the present Secretary was willing to make certain concessions if we had not been so adamant in our approach. For example, we should have put the cable through the forest near the Youth Center. I did sound a warning to our groups that you are pushing things in such a way that the government will come down heavily, and you will not be able to resist or recover easily. And this is what has happened.

Today Auroville does not have the clout with the government to say that they should step back and not interfere and, frankly, I don't think the present Auroville could handle the situation on its own. At the end of the day, you have to take the long term view. For example, if a road has to come now, let it come, because later it may be changed. If you only focus upon controlling what will happen in the next few years, I don't think that is mature.

We should be prepared for short-term losses because we have a higher goal and huge responsibility. This project Auroville will last millennia, and I believe Mother said it may be at least

300 years for the supramental transformation to take place. We are aiming at something very high, so why are we wasting our time fighting about petty things? Why should we unnecessarily make issues with the government, from where we need a lot of help?

I know the last two years have not been happy for you as the perception was that you were forced to take action against some Aurovilians, like initiating police reports against individuals and signing Office Orders replacing groups chosen or supported by the Residents Assembly, which you were not happy to do. If you had been the Secretary, would you have done things differently?

Totally. What happened was totally unexpected. I think the events that happened did not require the kind of punishment that was meted out. However, this was the call of the person in charge, and as a member of her team there were certain duty-bound obligations that I had to fulfill.

What can you say to those people who feel betrayed by you?

Their reaction is understandable, but it was not a betrayal. I had to act from the point of view of my official position. Besides, I knew that if I didn't sign, somebody else would sign, because it was decided at a higher level and was going to happen anyway.

I don't feel I have gone against the principles that I believe in. I feel I've done my best, in the given situation. I was not the Secretary and, besides, I was under great pressure, with little choice and limited capacity.

We can go softer, we can proceed more slowly, was my suggestion during the first six months. After that, I felt I was being increasingly mistrusted. I was not involved in any important meetings and slowly all my major responsibilities were taken away. I was gradually shunted out, put in a corner and made to feel *persona non grata*.

I had never been treated like this before. Previous Secretaries and Chairmen had a lot of confidence in me because within a few months they understood that I knew a little bit about Auroville and that I was reliable. This allowed us to get on with the office work, the job of administering Auroville. But this time it was different.

How have you handled this?

Initially, it was a big jolt to my ego and pride, my sense of self-esteem. I wondered what I had done to deserve this, but then a friend said you have to take it in the spirit of yoga. So that's what I try to do. I thought, if you don't do *sadhana*, Mother will make you do *sadhana*. Maybe I was not doing enough before, so I should shed my ego, my sense of self-importance, and intensify my yoga because this has never been a career-oriented job for me. I am here because of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother: I am here to grow beyond the normal human being.

From a conversation with Alan
Auroville Today October 2023 **3**

“We’ve set out to do Mother’s work”

Judith joined Auroville in 1971. Here she talks about her journey.

AVToday: Judith, what brought you to Auroville?

Judith: It was something from within, which flavoured everything then and still does now. In 1968, I’d left university and trained as a school teacher – not out vocation but because it seemed the obvious career for me, as it was in the family. I went to London for my first job but hated it the minute I stepped into the classroom. I didn’t last more than two months.

My sister Shraddhavan had agreed to house me. Her place was something of a hippy commune. There were 17 of us living in a basement flat intended for three people. One day, my sister met a man called Jobst. Jobst had been in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and couldn’t stop talking about The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and Auroville. He didn’t really fit into our young hippy scene, but what he said was really inspiring – for me it was a revelation, even a realization “that now everything makes sense”. I was rather at a loss at that time, but this pushed me to take up a serious job and earn the money to come to Auroville. That took me from 1968 to 1971. Then I booked the cheapest bus from London to New Delhi (40 pounds), ignoring the push from my fellow hippies to hitchhike all the way – they rated the bus as ‘very cowardly’. I arrived in Pondicherry on August 15. The rickshaw driver brought me to the Ashram office, where people told me, “Leave your bags here and quickly go for Mother’s balcony Darshan!” And off I dashed.

What did it do to you when for the first time you saw that frail figure of The Mother on the balcony?

I had already met Her through Her photographs and I had got into a very strong contact with Her. Her energy and Her vibrations had been guiding my footsteps ever since I first learned about Her. When I came to Pondy in the bus, this energy was just getting stronger and stronger and stronger. By the time I arrived, I was already permeated as it were by this amazing vibration which is The Mother. That Darshan saturated me even more. Two weeks later, on September 1st, I joined Auroville.

Did you have Mother’s permission to come to Auroville?

Oh yes. But I was first grilled by the very worst Entry Group you’ve ever heard of. It consisted of André – The Mother’s son –, Navajata, Roger Anger and Shyam Sunder, with Wil van Vliet, their secretary, the only other woman in the room. I was 24 at the time, but actually more like 17 in life experience. Roger was really having a go at me. He asked if I was just following my sister – Shraddhavan had gone to India sometime earlier and was teaching in Aspiration – and deeply questioned my spiritual aspiration. After that ordeal, someone suggested I send my photograph to Maggie, one of Mother’s secretaries, who showed it to Mother. And Mother gave Her permission. Less than a month later, I saw Her in Her room on my birthday; that’s when my fate was sealed once and for all.

Shraddhavan suggested I start working at the Matrimandir and get a place in the workers’ camp. I started working with Narad in the Matrimandir Nursery. But in the early mornings I would fetch a mummy and help dig the hole for the Matrimandir. That digging lasted till November that year; then it was given to the villagers because if it had continued at our pace we would still be digging that hole today. They did a much speedier job and finished it by the following February.

Did you have more contacts with The Mother?

Only for my birthday in 1972, though we lived with the sense of Her presence constantly with us. When the Mother passed in 1973, I was in England. My father had died a month earlier, and Shraddhavan and I had gone to the UK to be with my mother and for the funeral. We were on our way back to Auroville, staying overnight in the apartment of Margaret Fletcher in London, together with Edith and Joy, when we heard the news that Mother had passed. But there was no sadness in the room. I personally had the wonderful experience of all Her Grace coming down. I couldn’t relate to any shock or grief or pain.

We came back the next day to Auroville. Everybody was rushing to the Ashram to see Mother lying in state; but I had no impetus whatsoever to go to the Ashram and see Her. I came straight back to Kottakarai, where I was living at the time. As I walked across the fields from Matrimandir, I stopped to watch a calf being born. I found that deeply symbolic.

You see, we were living in Her energy, in Her force field as it were. We may have been doing all kinds of nonsense and stupid things, but still we were totally enveloped in that force field. And that remained, even after Her passing.

Shortly after Mother’s passing, the problems with the Sri Aurobindo Society started. Were you involved?

Not very actively, more on the side-lines but we were all involved one way or another. For quite a few years we were plodding along, trying to survive. I largely managed to stay out of trouble because that was the time I was having my three children. I was very absorbed in being a poverty-stricken mother. That was the period from 1974 to 1984.

Was it a shock for you that the Government of India passed the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act in 1980?

No, not really. Everything for me has always been, in one way or another, Mother’s Grace. I think that if that would not have happened, Auroville would have been closed down. Those were the two alternatives. We were too much trouble and there was actually no possibility that we could go on like we did.

The person behind this Act and the next one, the Auroville Foundation Act 1988, was Kireet Joshi who had personal contacts with many Aurovilians. Were you close with him as well?

No, none of the so-called ‘great figures’ of the time appealed to me. My inner commitment has always been totally given to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and I have never felt impressed by, nor felt the need for, any other teacher.

But Auroville owns a great debt of gratitude to him. For many years Kireet remained a very influential figure in Auroville. Many proposals would be discussed with him, and he would make many suggestions to reach what he believed Mother would have wanted.

I would sometimes disagree. For example, when he opposed our attempt to reach the “no exchange of money” economy which we wanted to do through an alternative currency experiment, to disconnect our thinking from the rupee economy. He felt it was not radical enough. We believed that, in terms of the evolution of the economy, we would need to make many small steps to reach the big one; but his position blocked all steps, and we finally got nowhere. We still haven’t arrived at a “no exchange of money” economy all these years later.

So you are disappointed with the state of Auroville’s economy?

I am not too pessimistic of where we are now, though it is still far short of where I think we should be. There has definitely been an evolution, there has been a progress. Almost all of us have an amazing prosperity and abundance, which is, quite frankly, something of a miracle. Speaking for myself, I started out being completely broke in the early years, living in a keet hut. That has completely changed. I now have a decent home, food on the table, clothes on the back and all my basic needs are being taken care of. I understand The Mother to have said that the basics needs of all should be provided for and then each one should be left to organize the rest according to their consciousness. I think that’s now almost a fact. But we still have a long way to go to reach an economy where there is no exchange of money and we can honestly say that money is no longer the Sovereign Lord.

You were involved in many Auroville working groups. You were a member of the early Economy Group, then chaired the Funds and Assets Management Committee for many years, and participated in a number of Working Committees. Do you feel that Auroville has made any progress in the running of Auroville?

I think that we are in a bit of a mess. But, as Mother says, your worst difficulties are your greatest opportunities, so I have faith that this is only a transitory phase.

A main issue, of course, is harmonizing our so-called ‘internal functioning’ with the structure imposed by the Auroville Foundation Act, which brought in a Secretary and a Governing Board, appointed by the Government of India. The problems started when the first Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Mr. L.K. Tripathy, began issuing Office Orders, amongst which was the infamous Office Order # 5, by which he appointed specific people to take charge of specific units of the Auroville Foundation.

I was very outspoken against Office Order # 5 and that drew the wrath of the Secretary on the heads of me and my partner. Of course I realize now that we were our own worst enemies. We should have behaved very differently. At the time we were living in anarchy and we were not ready for Office Orders or anything official like that. When Frederick came back to Auroville informing us that there would be an Auroville Foundation Act, we were given the impression



Judith

that we had won our battle and gained our freedom. What actually happened was something very different. Our anarchy was challenged and order was brought in. Where Justice Nigam and Officer on Special Duty Mr. Ojha had given us a rather free hand under the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act 1980, things became much stricter when the Auroville Foundation Act came into force. I think that the first Secretary was as shocked by us as we were by him.

The opposition to the system of Office Orders caused quite some commotion at the time and was a factor in the 1996 decision of the Government of India to expel, on the advice of Mr. Tripathy, your partner from India, who had been living here for more than 20 years. How did you both deal with that pain and how did you manage?

I know of nobody who hasn’t in their life had to face grief and things that hurt, and to face things that are very challenging. Yes, it was traumatically painful but it was never in question that I would remain in Auroville. For many years we hoped that it would not be a permanent banishment (we still continue to hope that one day the ban will be lifted) and I worked to keep our home in Srma intact. But the tsunami of 2004 made it very clear that I no longer had to do that. Above all, my relationship with Mother and Sri Aurobindo predates my relationship with my partner, even with my children, and always comes first for me. And so I was not tempted to leave Auroville.

What do you see as our main challenges today?

Auroville is at a moment of destiny where the work of physically manifesting the City according to the Master Plan has to be undertaken. It is, in my view, a now or never situation. Time is running out. We still do not own all the lands for the City area, leave alone for the Greenbelt; and there is quite a solid resistance from some Aurovilians to manifesting the Master Plan or parts of it. Humanity as whole seems to be much more open to realizing the Master Plan than many of the Auroville residents. Our inability as a community to agree and Auroville not being strong enough to resolve our deep divides are major obstacles to progress.

The present Secretary has confronted this situation head on. Her agenda when she arrived was to get the building of the infrastructure of Auroville off the ground and she decided to start by building the Crown Road, which resulted in a confrontation in which everybody behaved very badly. If we would all have been ‘willing servitors,’ and we had all bent our backs to the task, we would have done the job ourselves and created a lovely Crown Road, much better and far more beautiful than what we have now. The situation has only worsened since. The Secretary no longer automatically gives visa recommendations as expected, there are many pending court cases, some members of the Residents Assembly are ostracizing or persecuting or writing awful things about others who don’t follow their line, and there are even Auroville working groups sending legal notices to other working groups. It’s painful, to say the very least.

I think we should be aware of the influence of the forces that don’t want Auroville to happen. So far, they have found the best possible way of preventing it, by bamboozling us with all kinds of idée fixes, of how things should be done. I am not pointing fingers at any one; those forces are using all, whenever there is even the slightest opening. When we do follow Her energy, it is a miracle. If we don’t, everything gets blocked and everybody becomes unhappy and miserable. That’s the state of affairs today. Look at all the long faces you see on the road.

Do you see the present heavy involvement of the Governing Board and its Secretary, or of the Government of India, as permanent?

No, I don’t think it is. The Government has thousands of things to do, and if we do a good job, they won’t bother. But if we don’t, they of course will do the job for us.

continued on page 5



Judith in 1971. This was the photo sent to The Mother, which was damaged in the tsunami of 2004 when Judith was living in the Srma beach community



The Matrimandir’s workers’ camp in 1971

continued from page 4

Keep in mind that almost all the lands Auroville presently owns have been bought with donated money from private donors for the advertised purpose of building the Galaxy, a city of 50,000 people. If we would go off-track on that, that would be a public fraud. The city is not ours. As long as we stick to the programme, I don't think they will want to waste their time and energy on it. If I remember rightly, the initial idea of appointing a Governing Board was to ensure that if the Aurovilians would forget what they are here for, they could intervene and correct. That is their public duty and responsibility.

Can you tell about your involvement in trying to manifest the Line of Goodwill, one of the Lines of Force envisaged by Roger Anger in the Galaxy concept of the Auroville Master Plan?

It all began in 2017 with the Matrimandir Access Group looking for a way to get visitors from the Visitor's Center to Matrimandir that corresponded to the Master Plan. While poring over the maps, we realized that Roger had provided an access along the longest Line of Force in the Galaxy, the one we now call the Line of Goodwill. It is the Line of Force that starts 18 storeys high near the Visitors' Centre and tapers down to 2 storeys at the Matrimandir Reception Pavilion on the west shore of the Matrimandir Lake. One day, while concentrating in the Chamber, I had a powerful and detailed vision of what this Line of Force would look like. And I wrote it down. This description of mine started to circulate and other projects, such as the Integral Economy project and the Habitat project, became very interested and we all teamed up to get this project off the ground. [see AVToday # 338, September 2017, eds.]

I am aware that some people have difficulty with these Lines of Force, but for me it is quite straightforward; The Mother gave the job of designing the City to Roger and inspired him to come up with the Galaxy plan. I do not feel I have the need or the right to second-guess this powerful and inspired design. For me, to be 'a willing servitor' means to just get on with the job of manifesting this design.

But what happened with that project over the subsequent years really shocked me. That's when I suddenly and very tangibly discovered that although many people outside Auroville are ready to help build Auroville, there is a huge and almost implacable resistance coming from within Auroville.

We, the people behind this project, had managed to secure sufficient interest from individuals and institutions in India to start this immense project. We did not contact the Government of India for support – at the time the yearly grant for Auroville was very small – but we were strongly in contact with 'humanity as a whole', friends and wellwishers of Auroville. They were interested in the concept, in the design, and were willing to help in raising the necessary funds to fully materialize the various buildings. Much of it would have been up by now if it hadn't been for the Auroville Town Development Group which, like many of its predecessors, was actually an anti-development group.

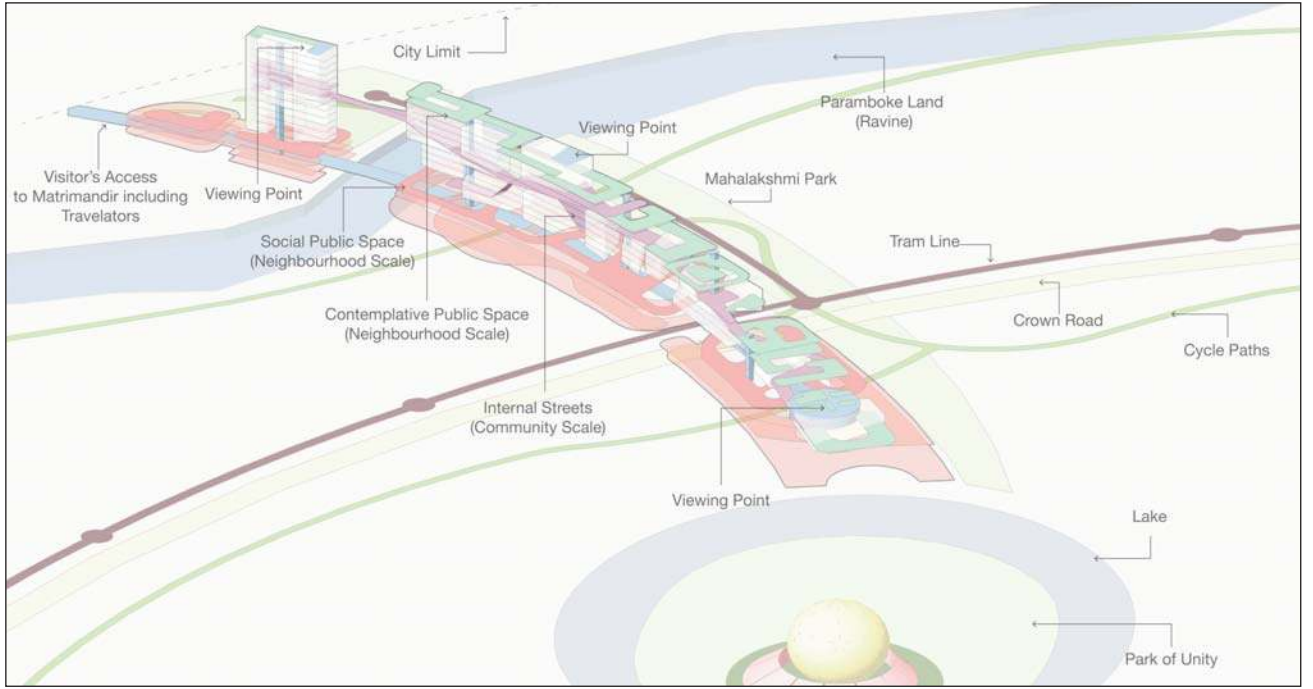
There is a kind of systemic fault in the way we conduct our affairs. There is always someone who puts up an objection, who only looks at the downside, and then manages to scuttle the project. I went through a very depressing experience of seeing that the Development Group talked the project dead by simply asking for more and more information, but refusing to tell us what exactly they needed in order to take a decision. We brought them piles of materials, we even had the personal help of a prominent Mumbai high-rise developer, who brought in his expertise and who even came and spoke to the Development Group about their permission requirements. But he was totally bamboozled by our process and his visit was to no avail. It was at that point that the project went dormant.

Wasn't it premature to propose building a Line of Force when the Detailed Development Plans as prescribed in our Master Plan had not been made?

We followed the Galaxy Plan where Roger had given the locations for the Lines of Force. The location of the Line of Goodwill had already been marked on the ground for decades. Anupama, using the parameters Roger had given, came up with a detailed urban design, which was presented to the community in several meetings. But nothing further ever manifested.

Your group expected the building to be funded by wellwishers. But the structure of the Auroville Foundation Act is such that such funding can only be done in the form of non-refundable donations to the Auroville Foundation. Wouldn't that have been a big impediment to raising money for building the Line of Goodwill?

We need to trust Mother's Grace. I assure you that funding for the Line of Goodwill wouldn't have been a problem. There were people outside Auroville who were supporting the Line of Goodwill and who would have had no issue coming up with the necessary money, even



Auroville's Galaxy Plan is marked by a number of so-called 'Lines of Force', long curving buildings. The Line of Goodwill is the name of the longest Line of Force, starting 18 storeys high near the Visitors' Centre parking area and tapering down to two storeys at the edge of the Matrimandir Lake. The Line of Goodwill is envisaged as being low and wide at the Matrimandir end and tall and narrow at the other end.

as non-refundable donations, because people believe in Auroville and Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's work.

My take is that we have set out on a journey to do The Mother's work. And I have experienced that if the money has to come, it always comes – even if only at the last minute. There is an infinite abundance and in the right state of consciousness we can plug in to this and things will develop. We can trust in Her Grace.

I work at the Matrimandir and that amazing project is the living proof. To illustrate this, some days ago we were talking about building the new service area for the Matrimandir so that we can move the workshops and continue with the Lake. One of us was very downhearted and he said "I will only carry on if you get me 2 crores". That very afternoon a lady walked into the office and quietly left us a cheque for 2 crores on the table. That's how everything I know of in Auroville has got built.

Can you elaborate more on your work at the Matrimandir?

In December 2021, the selection committee appointed us and asked for a four year plan of action. We came up with a six year plan, that by The Mother's 150th birth anniversary, on February 21, 2028, the Matrimandir, including the Gardens and the Lake, would be finished. That's our mandate. We created timelines and then there was the question of the budget. Where would the money come from? Our answer is always "from the Divine." It always has and still does.

What work is still pending on the building?

A few things. We are busy putting the four sliding entrance doors in place, and we need to replace the heliostat on top of the Matrimandir. The present one's remaining lifetime is less than five years. We have contacted IIT Chennai for designing a next generation heliostat, as the technology is fast developing. We are still debating what to do with the crane on top of the Matrimandir. Some people want to renovate it, others want to dismantle it. But this is not a priority.

In this context, I would like to mention that the Matrimandir is not a building like a south Indian temple or a gothic cathedral which last for hundreds of years without the need for major maintenance. Matrimandir will need endless renovations. If we succeed in manifesting our plans by 2028, there will be plenty of work left for our successors. They may have to look at the condition of the ferro-cement triangles on the outer skin, or their Kemperol covering - but none of these is at present a cause of concern.

What about the gardens?

When we became executives we were in a bit of a quandary about the gardens. There had been a set of designs which had been approved with plenty of positive feedback, and which subsequently, in the typical Auroville process, got stopped. Three different design and approval processes were then put in place but nobody was completely satisfied with either the process or the result. Our take is that we want everything to be finished by 2028, and that we don't have the luxury to start another design selection so we are going with the existing designs. The exception is the Garden of Bliss which is

re-envisaged by Auroson, who was appointed to this job by the previous Matrimandir management group. This doesn't mean that the finished gardens will be fixed for all eternity. As our consciousness evolves, so the gardens will evolve to more and more manifest their designated significance.

Today there is the lake extension dispute. People object to the cutting of trees for phase two and question the need for a 10 metres deep lake. What's your take?

The Matrimandir has always been mired in objections, even from the early days when we were told that we had been digging the hole at the wrong place. I don't know of anything at the Matrimandir which has not been subject of controversy. Mother said that Auroville would be built despite the Aurovilians and that's why one can laugh. If I look at the Matrimandir I see that She was more than correct.

We are following the lake design of Harald Kraft as approved by Roger. It was hanging on the board in the Office when we moved in. According to this concept, the lake will be on average 90 metres wide and have a central depth of 10 metres. For the lake's second phase this has meant we have had to prune and transplant every tree and bush that could be transplanted. Unfortunately, neem trees have proved impossible to successfully transplant, so they have had to be felled. The wood is being carefully stored to make into furniture and fittings for the Reception Pavilion and the Service Area buildings and some of the wood has gone to Svaram to be turned into musical instruments.

The area of the former Matrimandir workers camp has some gorgeous trees. Are you thinking of removing them as well?

Hopefully not. The Reception Pavilion and the main West Bridge are planned in that area. In fact we are discussing creating three peninsulas, as indicated by Roger Anger in his design. In Lake Section 2 there are some rare trees, some of which were planted on the occasion of the International Youth Year decades ago. Roger also indicated an orchid garden and that would correspond to the present office area where there are also some rare trees. But all of this has yet to be detailed. If there is any way those trees can be preserved, they will be preserved. Most will be in the third phase of the lake, which will start after the 2024 winter monsoon, at the beginning of 2025.

Auroville has become a tourist spot with the Matrimandir as its focal point. How are you dealing with the increasing number of tourists and visitors?

The new Matrimandir viewing point, which was inaugurated on August 15th, is a big help. It is much larger than the old one and offers a much better view. The tourists appear to appreciate it very much. Regarding the people who wish to visit the Chamber, we are at about the same numbers as before COVID. Right now we are in the process of introducing improved software for online bookings. This will allow us to better manage the visitors' requests.

How do you see Auroville's future?

As always, I am very positive. When, in 1968, I decided to drop all and come here, it was because of three things: there was to be a City for 50,000, there was the Galaxy designed by Roger, and there was the Auroville Charter. They completely inspired me, that inspiration has never left me and I have never given up on them. I still live in that vibration which I experienced when seeing The Mother for the first time. For me, Her guidance is very concrete, which makes Auroville so different from any other place on earth. I have done a lot of travelling and I have been in many of the world's most beautiful places, but every time I come here I feel I am where I belong. Being here I feel totally blessed. I have no doubt that Auroville will be built according to the Divine Will.

In conversation with Carel



View of the Matrimandir from the new viewing point

The rise and fall of the Aura network

A project evaluation by Aman who grew up in Auroville and at present is studying in the USA.

In early 2019, Dan Be Kim, a Korean woman who had grown up in Auroville, returned to the community. Auroville had recently marked its 50th birthday; there was much to celebrate, many accomplishments, but the community was still struggling to manifest its vision of a cashless economy.

Dan Be had been studying in Canada, South Korea and Germany. Perhaps inspired by her childhood in Auroville, she was intrigued by the potential of concepts such as a universal basic income, a circular economy – and, in a broader sense, the opportunities and challenges of creating an alternative economic system that would be more egalitarian and sustainable.

Back in Auroville, Dan Be tied up with a number of other community members who were similarly interested in advancing the development of Auroville’s economic experiment. After several conversations – often over tea and biscuits/lunches – these individuals came up with the idea of creating an app that would merge the potential of technology with the possibilities of a sharing economy, and they launched an innovative project that would come to mark a milestone in Auroville’s economic history.

The Aura app (as it came to be known) was officially launched in November 2020. In its mission statement, the Aura team stated that its goal was “the conscious evolution of an economy away from an individualistic life of survival, evolving towards a life of creativity and communal harmony.”

“The vision of the Aura is to break free from the linear value cycle where goods are used and turned into waste,” the statement continued. “As the world struggles with an unstable economy, a pandemic, poverty, global warming, pollution, war and hatred; a seed of love and human prosperity can now be planted in the soil nourished by the Aura Network. An unconditional sharing and interdependence no longer remains an unreachable ideal but a living reality.”

The Aura app had some notable early successes: 350 users joined it in its first 6 months, and over 600 offers were recorded in 2021, its first full year of operation. Yet earlier this year, the app announced that it was shutting down.

Like the Aura team, like so many who have grown up and lived in Auroville, I too am fascinated by the potential of an alternative economy. I was born in Auroville and attended Transition School and Future School. In recent years, I have been studying and reading about economics, trying to understand what types of tools or mechanisms could prove useful in breaking out of the dominant economic paradigm that seems so entrenched around the world.

I found myself intrigued by Aura and, towards the end of 2021, reached out to the team to see if there was any way I could learn from their work, and maybe get involved. Everyone was very welcoming; in the true spirit of a sharing economy they were willing to share their valuable time, and also thousands of data points to help me understand patterns of usage. After conversations with Dan Be and long-time Aurovillian B, another core team member, I worked closely with Pranav, one of the main web developers, mostly doing data analysis. I also interviewed and spoke with several users.

Through this work, I came to a much better understanding of both Aura’s initial successes, and some of the contributing causes for its eventual shutdown. I feel both of these are important to understand for what they can teach us about future economic experiments in Auroville as the community continues along its search for a place, in the Mother’s words, where money would not be the Sovereign Lord. More generally, I am interested to know what lessons Aura has to offer the broader world for the possibility of an alternative economy.

The Aura app

Supported by a grant from the National Research Foundation, a part of the South Korean government, the development of the Aura app went through several rounds of wireframing, prototyping, and debugging until it was finally

ready to be launched on the Google Play and Apple app stores. The app was also launched alongside a public facing web page and an admin panel, which allowed the project holders to visualise data and optimise performance.

After a user signed up, an admin from the team would then check to make sure that the user was either an Aurovillian, a SAVI Volunteer, a Newcomer or a friend of Auroville, in order to make sure that the network remained a closed community-driven project. Aurovilians were the primary users of the network, making up more than 70% of the user base. SAVI Volunteers made up 17% and Newcomers made up 11%.

The user interface was designed to facilitate the exchange of goods and services within the community. Upon joining the network, users could create profiles, list items or services they were willing to share or exchange, and use an inbuilt messaging platform to arrange meet-ups for exchanges. The app utilized a point-based system that gave credits to users on a regular basis, and users could also gain points by offering items or services. Points could then be “spent” – or traded in the language of a sharing economy – for goods or services from other members.

Initial successes

As noted, the app found early traction in the community, and its underlying goals seemed to resonate with Aurovilians’ desires for a different kind of economy. One user named Luke stated that

particularly active user, said that the network “allowed me to look at my life and see what I can offer. I look around my home and identify objects that I no longer use.” Items, such as clothing, furniture or tools that might have once been discarded found new life through sharing. All of this seemed very much in line with the project’s stated goal to “create a space for a circular economy where things considered waste, or things that are not being purposed can be identified and then upcycled and repurposed.”

Limitations—and shut down

By the middle of January in 2021, the network was being used by over 25 people on a daily basis and on some days witnessed more than 30 exchanges of goods and services. Yet, on June 15th of 2023, the Aura project holders put out an announcement stating that the “epic experiment” was coming to an end. What had happened?

The end may have appeared abrupt. But based on the research I conducted, I believe the project faced several obstacles from its very inception. Some of these it was able to overcome; many it was ultimately unable to.

Some of the challenges were technical in nature. From the early days the team encountered difficulties, such as lags in uploading new entries, which misled users to think that the network was smaller than it actually was. In addition, the chat feature repeatedly crashed, making it difficult to sustain the community that was building around the project. At least one user I spoke with complained that the app could be very slow and difficult to use.

Some users I interviewed also pointed to the complexity of the points system as a contributing factor in lowering usage of the app. “I think the system of the points did not work well,” said one user who emphasized how much she otherwise appreciated the app and the team’s efforts. This user also suggested that part of the reason the network didn’t flourish was because it still represented a form of “materialism,” in which the points were just another version of money—one that was far more cumbersome and limited in scope than traditional currency. She compared the use of points to Auroville’s Financial Service system, where traditional money is still circulated even if the community doesn’t call it by name.

Based on my research, however, the main obstacles were not intrinsic to the app itself. One of the main issues was the challenge of what one user characterized as “freeriders.” As the number of users increased to over 450, requests or needs began outnumbering offers by 507 to 255 listings – almost double the amount. Freeriding can be characterized as the problem of users who take without giving back, exploiting the generosity of others and disrupting the equilibrium necessary to build a true sharing economy. Of course, this problem has nothing to do with the app itself but stems from a more general social dynamic within the broader community.

Freeriders also caused bidding wars on the platform, which went very much against the spirit of fairness and reciprocity at the heart of the project. These issues degraded the quality of interactions on the network and discouraged some participants. Several participants I spoke with suggested the need for filtering participants – what one person called “user control” – to maintain the quality of interactions. This would, however, cause its own problems, notably worsening the difficulties the network had in scaling up.

The app also had the misfortune of having to ride out two major crises in the Auroville region: first COVID, followed by the social divisions that have overtaken Auroville since the end of 2021. The launch of the app was delayed by pandemic restrictions, and those restrictions continued to impede in-person meetings and exchanges necessary to sustain the network. In one of their reports, the organizers lamented “the pall of COVID restrictions” hanging over Aura.

One seeming ray of light that emerged from COVID was the broader move towards cashless transactions in Auroville, and India at large.



Aman Kapur

However, the app was unable to build on this possible opportunity as virtually every aspect of the Auroville community was soon shaken by the rancour and divisions that overtook the community following the events of December 2021. This conflict distracted both organizers and participants on the network; it also broke the bonds of trust and solidarity that were central to the network’s early successes.

One final point is important to make. An app like Aura exists within a broader economic and social ecosystem, and its success hinges on its ability to effect change within that broader context. Yet, as several people I spoke with pointed out to me, the central role of money within Auroville is now deeply entrenched, and it is, of course, even more deeply entrenched within the broader Indian ecosystem. Users pointed out how these realities limited the scope of Aura, for example by preventing the ability to use the app for everyday transactions such as paying bills, taxes, or purchasing everyday items not available on the network.

As one lady who used the network said to me: “Never say never, but now we still live in a money-ruled world and consciousness. The time will hopefully come when we start giving and sharing more... but that’s a long story.”

Lessons and Implications

By the end of 2021, around the time Auroville’s conflict was beginning, there were almost 500 total users but only about 2% of them were active. It took more than a year for the network to officially shut down, but signs of trouble were apparent as almost no transactions took place in the last two months of 2021.

Without exception, the users I interviewed for my research praised the idea and the team behind the project. They saw it as an important and creative experiment, one very much in line with Auroville’s ideals and the effort to create economic transformation in the bioregion and beyond. As one user told me, “It is an experiment and we must keep on experimenting to rely less on cash.”

Despite this enthusiasm, what are the lessons we can draw from the app’s eventual shutdown? In my opinion, the key lesson is that innovative ideas and technology are not enough to bring about radical change. Ultimately, any app (or similar project) is only as strong and effective as the social context which it operates in. This point came out in multiple ways from virtually everyone I spoke with.

One concrete idea suggested by a woman I spoke with was the need for greater outreach to the community. This kind of outreach could help build awareness both about the app itself but more generally about the possibilities it offered and the benefits of broader economic transformation. In other words, the Aura app was a noble project but should be seen as just one component within a larger process. B, one of the founders, said that “It’s [Aura] not going to solve all the problems of Auroville. It’s just one more step.” To build on this stepping stone, it is essential to take stock of the experiment – what worked and what didn’t. That was my goal in doing this research, and writing this article.

In June of this year, the Aura team announced that their “epic experiment” would be shutting down on August 15th. “The Auroville journey to go beyond debit capitalism has been unsuccessful,” they wrote. “Money still remains temporarily a Sovereign Lord here as elsewhere. But the collapsing global empire is rapidly turning to digital currencies, and the consequences will soon be evident.”

Aman Kapur

Ruminations: Two Dreams

Radical revolutionaries par excellence, true trail-blazers of the New World, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in the course of their lives laid the foundation upon this earth for two of the most extraordinary, most ambitious Dreams ever dreamt: the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1926 and, forty-two years later, Auroville in 1968. The Ashram was meant to be the cradle of collective sadhana where the New Man was to be born and Auroville, the golden crucible for the realisation of this perennial human yearning for enduring Oneness and Unity.

Almost a hundred years since the creation of the Ashram and fifty-three since that of Auroville, it is perhaps an opportune time to honestly look upon these evolutionary experiments and assess these evolutionary experiments of which we have been the privileged and ever-grateful participants.

The propellant for both these Dreams is the same: the readiness to take up their challenge as “willing servitors of the Divine Consciousness”, which is nothing else but *sadhana* or the commitment to self-perfecting. How sincere and focussed have we been in this service of the Divine Consciousness? And over the passage of time, how far have we come today towards actualising the promise of these utopian yearnings?

In this endeavour, the Ashram has had a significant headstart: the physical Presence of the Masters, Sri Aurobindo’s for twenty-four years, the Mother’s for forty-seven. Auroville, on the other hand, could walk hand-in-hand with Her for merely five. We at the Ashram in Pondicherry were in a way nestled in Their constant protection and guidance. The Aurovilians were not as fortunate and have had, therefore, the far more arduous task of pursuing this *sadhana* on the strength of each one’s personal sincerity and conviction and on an intuitive guidance from within.

The Divine Grace, however, has presided over the development of Auroville with solicitous care and consideration. Even after the unfortunate, though necessary, split with the Sri Aurobindo Society, the leaders of Auroville of the time invited the Government into Auroville to keep sustaining the Mother’s Dream. Thankfully, the Dream continued to benefit from a very sympathetic attention to the appointments made by the Indian Government to the various posts of responsibility for shepherding and fortifying Auroville’s collective endeavour. The advisers and executives were all human beings in a revitalising resonance with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s vision.

The Ashram too, notwithstanding numerous risks and pressures, has visibly steered clear of certain dangers to stay on course.

However, the living truth of the original vision needs to be constantly guarded from the biggest danger of all: institutionalisation. The day Truth sinks into dogmatic ritual and mechanical reverence, it is the final blow. It is the cardinal responsibility of the disciples not to let the Masters’ life-embracing vision fall into a religious quicksand of empty ritual. Both the Ashram and Auroville must be wary of not floundering in that quagmire. We all need to be ever vigilant because sincere devotion can imperceptibly veer into religious devotionism, where we substitute popular gods for the images of our living Masters.

With the opening command of the Auroville Charter, The Mother was inaugurating a veritable revolution! “Auroville belongs to

nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole.”

This signifies a total reversal of the ordinary human condition. It implies the transcending of the sense of proprietorship, which can only be achieved by transcending the ego. And this ego, let us remember, reigns not only in the individual but more alarmingly in the collective as well. No group, however big or powerful, should assume the right to any kind of “ownership” of such a universal Dream.

Seen from outside, Auroville seems to have been slumbering lately in a worrisome stagnation. The project isn’t really moving forward towards what it was projected to be. Without a greater renewal of energy and fresh blood, the-hundred-and-twenty-odd-communities-in-search-of-a-city might lose steam. However, this renewal must occur in a natural, organic way. Awakened people must feel the need for Auroville and not the other way round. Auroville cannot be artificially populated, for that would invite a most unnecessary and undesirable hotch-potch of energies and aspirations not always quite in resonance with the vastness of the Mother’s Dream.

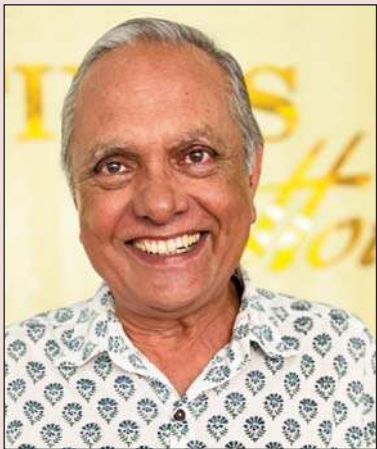
Auroville has lately been enveloped by a strange kind of casualness in the routine lives of many residents, each leading their separate little lives without really connecting to the larger collective dimension that Auroville is primarily meant to be. The Ashram has not been spared either. The sense of community seems to be slowly losing focus (except on 2nd December when the Ashram community comes together for a heart-warming spectacle of a joyous one-pointed aspiration). Ashramites are increasingly satisfied with leading their life in a diminished circle, having their meals at home, watching television serials at home rather than congregating in the hallowed Playground for the Saturday film, or enriching themselves through cultural activities taking place at the School or the Theatre. There are some who even prefer to exercise or do yoga at home or meditate or sit quietly in their private spaces.

The COVID scare, though it ironically witnessed an upsurge of collective solidarity (largely thanks to former and present students brought together by the Ashram management to provide physical sustenance to its members), has in the long-term affected the unifying fabric of the community. If individual sadhana and salvation had been the objective of our life here, what need was there of starting the Ashram or Auroville? They are revolutionary experiments precisely because of their life-changing collective dimension.

Another unsavoury feeling, both in Auroville and at the Ashram, is of encountering people who flaunt a certain sense of special entitlement. Being an Aurovilian or an Ashramite should not be lived as a right but rather as a gift of grace. Let us never lose our immense gratitude for being allowed to join this unique caravan of seekers. Extreme vigilance and sincerity become pivotal in not permitting such an attitude to contaminate or, god forbid, sabotage the Dream.

The Mother, while offering the Charter of Auroville, made one guideline significantly clear by placing it at the very top: “to live in Auroville, one must be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.” Being WILLING servitors implies an individual choice and sincerity and that is fundamental. When you have servitors acting under fear or political or social threats, then we are

Maurice Shukla grew up as a child in the Mother’s School and now helps wherever he can be useful at the Ashram: translating, editing, teaching and, evidently, forever learning. A month after being named Maurice by The Mother, he was called upon to represent Iceland at the inaugural ceremony of Auroville!



negating the very bedrock, the very *raison-d’être* of the experiment: willing sincerity to want to change our old ways of action, reaction, sentiment and opinion.

Any change brought about by external pressure or threats is NEVER going to be a REAL, enduring change. We have been called by the Divine to work sincerely towards this real, enduring transformation of our nature and not merely a cosmetic, external one. And in the worst of scenarios, if Auroville or the Ashram were to be turned into someone’s political or ideological agenda, then that would surely lead to its demise.

The success or failure of the Dream, be it the Ashram or Auroville, will depend on the sincerity and willingness of the collaboration of the instruments the Divine has chosen. If we do not see it being fulfilled, it will be a reflection of OUR lack of receptivity and weakness, not of the viability or authenticity of the Dream. It would be truly tragic for the Dream of the Divine to be institutionalised or appropriated, whether by individuals or by a government. Therefore it rests on the determination of the Divine’s instruments to take it to its final glorious fulfillment.

Let me end my ruminations with a quote from the Master. Though it was written at a time when India was struggling to throw off the colonial oppressor, I feel it to be potently relevant to both Auroville and the Ashram’s endeavour to regenerate the deeper truth of their creation and continuance. Referring to Mother India, Sri Aurobindo said,

The Mother asks us for no schemes, no plans, no methods. She herself will provide the schemes, the plans, the methods better than any we can devise. She asks us for our hearts, our lives, nothing less, nothing more...Regeneration is literally rebirth and rebirth comes not by the intellect, not by the fullness of the purse, not by policy, not by change of machinery, but by the getting of a new heart, by throwing away all that we were into the fire of sacrifice and being reborn in the Mother.

Maurice Shukla

The unspoken divide

It is no secret that there are divisions within the community at present. Most obviously, they involve disagreements over how the town should be developed, as well as over the role and powers of the Governing Board/Foundation Secretariat vis-à-vis the Residents Assembly. But there may be even deeper divisions than these, which are the more powerful because they have profounder roots, have been around much longer and, generally, are not openly expressed.

One of the most important of these unspoken beliefs is that certain people should not be in Auroville. Who the people to be excluded are varies according to the person holding the opinion, just as does the rationale for wanting to exclude/eject certain people. Sometimes it is a reaction to somebody acting in a way which is obviously against the ideals and wellbeing of others or the larger community (a feeling which may have many takers at the moment). Sometimes it is based on a more generalised unease, like the sense that someone doesn’t ‘belong’ because they display a ‘colonial’ mentality, or has racial prejudices.

Another reason given for wanting to exclude or, at the very least, downgrade some Aurovilians is the allegation that these people have little or no idea of what this place is really about. At one time, this accusation was most commonly directed at some of those local people who, it was believed, joined Auroville only to improve their financial or social status, and who thereafter made no obvious attempt to understand the ideal or to integrate. Some people have expanded this category to include those whom, they allege, have simply come to Auroville to retire and/or enjoy an ‘easy’ life, or to focus only on tree planting or running a business. Casting the net even wider, some Indians seem to believe – although, once again, this is never or rarely expressed – that Westerners and other non-Indian Aurovilians cannot understand or do this yoga. Sri Aurobindo demolished this belief many years ago:

Our aim is not, either, to found a religion or a school of philosophy or a school of yoga, but to create a ground of spiritual growth and experience and a way which will bring down a greater Truth beyond the mind but not inaccessible to the human soul and consciousness. All can pass who are drawn to that Truth, whether they are from India or elsewhere, from the East or from the West.

Here we approach the nub of the issue: the belief seemingly held by some that they are ‘true’ Aurovilians because they understand and are guided in their lives by Mother, while others are not. The consequence is the tendency of these people to believe that those who disagree with them do so out of ignorance, and consequently do not need to be listened to.

This, I would suggest, is the root cause of why some of our disputes are so intractable, and why they are not amenable to being solved by reason alone.

Many of those perceived by others as claiming spiritual ‘elitehood’ would reject such a label. These people would simply say that they are endeavouring to live and carry out what Mother wished for Auroville. This is to be respected.

Yet some of these people seem to believe, or, at least, imply that as they possess a somewhat higher consciousness than others, they see more clearly what needs to be done, so they should be the ones to direct the affairs of the community.

This seems logical. After all, Mother herself had stated that the community should be organised by those with the highest consciousness. So what is the problem?

Well, for one thing, given our present emphasis upon collective decision-making, any group claiming to organise Auroville on the basis of their superior consciousness would require wider community endorsement. But would we all agree on who the people with the superior consciousness are? I doubt it because I think we lack agreement upon how to identify them.

One response would be that these are the ones who are well versed in the writings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. But this is oversimplistic. Mental comprehension alone without a deeper understanding is insufficient, and can even be dangerous when wrongly applied, for example, by zealots and sectarians. At present, those who claim to be attempting to redirect Auroville along the right path based upon Mother’s words explain the present turmoil as resistance from those who oppose Mother’s Auroville. This is one view. But it is also possible that those who quote Mother’s words in support of their present attempts to improve Auroville, whatever their best intentions, do not have sufficient wisdom and spiritual understanding (as well as, in certain cases, the practical competence) to apply them in an internal, harmonious way, and this has resulted in considerable collateral damage.

In fact, Mother often emphasized that a drop of spiritual experience means more than thousands of words, and many of those early Aurovilians whom she personally chose were clearly not ‘spiritual’ in any conventional sense, suggesting that she chose them more for their openness to her Force than for their ‘spirituality’. Perhaps even today some of our less obviously ‘spiritual’ brothers and sisters are more in contact with that Force than those who so eloquently quote and write about our spiritual guides.

In the same way that I think many of us – myself included – lack sufficient inner understanding to be able to select our spiritual leaders, I believe we lack the deep understanding of this complex, multilayered spiritual experiment that would allow us to judge who should or should not be in Auroville. For in judging we tend to focus upon the superficialities of an individual’s behaviour or our interpretations of why that person is in Auroville, but this may have little or nothing to do with why a superior power has drawn us together for a specific work in this

place, at this time (although sometimes Mother gave hints, like her observation that everybody here represents a problem that needs to be transformed not only for the individual but also for the world at large).

This doesn’t mean that everybody who is here now has ‘tenure’ and will be here forever, or that the present residents represent an ‘elite’ portion of humanity. Merely, that, at this moment, we are the ideal mix for a certain evolutionary work to take place, the complexity and depth of which exceeds our human understanding.

A further, more mundane, argument against giving people the power to exclude Aurovilians from the community is the danger of this power being abused by those who simply dislike others or have something to gain by excluding them.

So while we should continue to act vigorously against abuses using community-approved processes, as well as to stand for what we believe Mother is asking of us at this moment, I don’t think Aurovilians should be excluded from the community (unless, of course, they have broken the law: in which case, the Indian Government or Indian courts will have the final say), however much we may fail to understand or disagree with them. Rather, we need to trust that everybody who is in Auroville is meant to be here at this moment, that something far beyond our understanding is arranging things, and be deeply humble, grateful, that we ourselves are allowed to be part of it. Because who among us can say they really understand why they are here, or feels they ‘deserve’ to be a participant in this extraordinary experiment?

We are far, very far, from realizing the genuine fraternity that Sri Aurobindo spoke of. But, who knows? If we could all exercise a little more humility in the face of the great Unknown, as well as deep gratitude for being called to be here, perhaps, just perhaps, it could open a crack in the door to a new spirit of collaboration.

Alan

Demise of Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, ex-Chairman of the Auroville Foundation



Dr. M.S Swaminathan, distinguished agricultural scientist and the leader of India's Green Revolution, passed away on Thursday 28 September, at the age of 98. He was the founder and chief of the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation in Chennai, the organisation that played a key role in India's 'Green Revolution', developing high yielding rice varieties that boosted the income and productivity of poor farmers.

Auroville was honoured to have him as Chairman of the Auroville Foundation from 1997-99, and saw him as a committed friend and adviser ever since. In 2002, during a filmed interview for Swiss TV, Dr. Swaminathan said: "Auroville stands for fulfillment through work, work which is meaningful, work which can regenerate the environment, which can regenerate the human spirit, and can create more love and understanding and compassion among people. So, I think its message is very relevant to today's world as after the September 11th events this is the message of hope."

Legal updates

On 12th August last year, the case regarding the legitimacy of the Residents Assembly working groups was judged in favour of the RA. Soon after, on 26th August, the AVFO appealed the case, and obtained a temporary stay on the judgement, pending the outcome of the appeal. The case was heard on 4th September 2023. A massbulletin from the RA WCom informed that "the Hon'ble judges noted that the RA is a statutory body...allowing the RA to function on the condition that no policy decision is taken that would change the structure of the Auroville Foundation. This removes impediments and restrictions on the functioning of the RA and its Working Committee, subject to the above condition." The RA WC clarified that this is only a modification of the interim order of stay granted earlier. The main appeal is still pending before the Madras High Court, with the next hearing scheduled on 27th September, 2023.

A new writ petition by an affected resident asking the court to intervene in the planned 'Outer Ring Road' was not admitted by the Madras High Court, as the said resident had been offered another house. The order confirms the functions of the RA to formulate the Master Plan and do Admissions and Terminations, but also states that "Auroville houses are the property of the Auroville Foundation, and the Governing Board has the full legal right to do with them as they see fit. Individual Aurovilians, who are the "third party" that the judgement speaks of, have no right to claim any say over Auroville assets: they are allowed to use it or not, as the Governing Board decides."

Matrimandir lake presentation

On 19th September, Michael Bonke presented to the community future plans for the Matrimandir lake. This includes an underwater reservoir for drinking water, the first in the world, sufficient to support 50,000 Aurovilians for 100 days; and the development of hydro-power storage directly linked to a solar plant

towards making Auroville independent of the TNEB grid. He said that work on the first section of the lake had confirmed that deep water storage using HDPE foil is successful so a 10 metre deep lake is feasible. He also pointed out that evaporation would be much less at this depth than in a shallower lake. He also explained that islands or peninsulas in the lake would interfere with the current, which is essential for oxygenation of the water, and that trees on isolated islands in the lake could not survive.

One of the points raised was that tests on the test lake had not been completed, and therefore it was premature to continue with new excavations. However, Michael said that studies done elsewhere in the world confirmed the feasibility of what they were doing.

An open letter, sent after the meeting and signed by a number of Aurovilians, appreciated his presentation but asked that a plan of this magnitude be peer-reviewed by eminent experts, especially those working in our climate zone. It also questioned the extent of the present lake excavation as Mother's original drawing, which Michael had shown at the meeting, suggested the lake would be smaller. And it made an urgent appeal: 'Please consider beauty as equally important as technology'.

Revelation tree cutting

In June 2023, for 2 days, workers employed by the AVFO Land Board, cut a total of 1,863 trees aged between 3-15 years old in Revelation Forest Sanctuary. Most of the trees were rare evergreen species which are slow growing and can take around 200 years to mature. The RA TDC wrote to the Secretary and the AVFO Land Board, copying several of Tamil Nadu's ministers in the Department of Environment, Forest and Climate Change stating that "this has a huge impact, which unfortunately cannot easily be quantified, to biodiversity loss and a young, yet functional, ecosystem".

In an accompanying letter, the RA TDC urged the Secretary and the AVFO Land Board to consider the environmental impact of the current rushed implementation of the Master Plan, not just to Auroville itself but also in the wider context of the earth's dimate crisis.

The RA TDC reminds people that all areas in Auroville fall under the ruling of the National Green Tribunal judgement of 28.04.2022, which states that no further construction is to be started in any area of the project (except the Crown where there are no trees) until proper township plans have been prepared, and prior Environmental Clearance has been granted. Hence, any activity in regard to cutting of trees or construction/development is in violation of this judgement.

Possible land exchange in Forecomers and Ravena

The Foundation Office is reportedly considering exchanging 22 acres in the heart of Forecomers and Ravena communities for poramboke land in the City Centre area. Forecomers was so named by Mother because it was the first settlement of Auroville, and at present it is part of the largest

contiguous forested area in Auroville. The edge of Forecomers forest is only one kilometre away from Pondicherry airport, and two kilometres from where settlements begin in Puducherry and Kottakupam, so it is an important buffer zone between Auroville and Pondicherry. The community of Success, which borders it on the west, was home to the first tree nursery of Auroville. If the planned exchange goes through, it would be separated from the rest of the forest.

Solitude land dispute

Solitude Farm was recently embroiled in a land issue, as seven members of the neighbouring panchayats claimed that part of Solitude Farm was partially built on temple land. Krishna, the manager of Solitude Farm, reports that the panchayat leaders were told by the Foundation Office that he was not given that land by Auroville but was occupying it, which, he says, was strange since he has been farming the land since 1996. He has also been asked to leave his house to make way for the Outer Ring Road.

Forest workers gratuity payments

On 11th September, the Forest Group wrote to the FO FAMC and FO BCC requesting that they fulfil financial obligations to fifty forest workers, some of whom have worked in Auroville forests for over forty years. Since these groups stopped financial support of forest workers, many may have to be laid off and gratuity payments amounting to over 41.5 lakhs are owed, as well as one month pay in lieu of notice, which amounts to a further 5 lakhs. The Forest Group wrote "The employees have been informed of the situation and these employees now require that their gratuity is paid by the BCC, from the "Gratuity AV services" account, according to the precedence of the last 15 years. It is also only felt fair that since no notice of termination of employment was issued by yourselves, then a month's wage in lieu of notice should be paid". The AVFO groups have not yet replied, but had previously indicated that no gratuity payments would be given to the forest workers.

Auroville Green Services

Auroville Green (Belt) Services is a new group formed by the FO FAMC. A few of the existing Forest Group members decided to join the newly formed group, but the Forest Group clarified that these members joined this group in their personal capacity and in no way are a voice of the Forest Group.

RA WC letter to the community

On 18th September, the RA Working Committee shared an open letter in which they state that they "are aware that many of us struggle to stay positive and not give in to exhaustion and fear and a feeling of helplessness at the destruction and lack of humanity that seems to go on with no consequence". They add, "We understand the fear that is felt by many and we don't judge it or the reasons for it, but we hope this won't be the place we each choose to act from. Fear is useful, it informs us

where the danger lies. But it's not a good decision-maker. We call on us all to act from a space of collective aspiration, hope, and faith."

Safety concerns on the Crown

The ongoing works on the Crown Road, which have slowed or halted on some stretches, combined with summer monsoon rains, have caused difficult travelling conditions. As the new road is higher than the surrounding areas in most places, and the stormwater channels appear to be inadequate to catch rainwater, the bypasses alongside the Crown have become dangerous in some places because they flood easily. In fact, a car was already stranded in the mud near the Youth Center.

Furthermore, the prefabricated concrete blocks which pave the road have many holes in them, which were necessary when the crane listed them into position. Unless these holes are filled, they may cause injuries to wandering cows and goats, leading to tensions with the villagers, as well as becoming mosquito breeding grounds in the monsoon season.

Visitors Center books

On 19th August 2023, the team working at the Visitors' Center (VC) Information Service was instructed by email to remove all written material by 1st September 2023. The mail, sent by the Foundation Office appointed Visitors Centre executives, stated that the intention was to "move and merge the book selling activity into the space that is presently taken up by the AV Papers book shop; [and] to end the activities of the information giving activity in the VC campus, as this will be taken up by the VC executives". The information team has been told that they may continue to communicate information to visitors verbally.

Asset survey

The FO FAMC, in association with the Housing Service Team, is initiating a survey of the income generating and service units to gather asset-related information from these units to update the database. The information required includes size of the asset, number of employees, water supply/electric supply, waste disposal details, and vehicles used.

Auroville Literature Festival videos

Videos of the presentations made at the Auroville Literature Festival on 25th-27th August have now been released online. For more information visit aurovillelitfest.org or write to aurovillelitfest@auroville.org.in

Blind Babble Event

Youthlink, which is a diverse group of youth from Auroville who work towards creating a positive impact in Auroville, invited all residents to a 'Blind Babble Event' on 14th Sept. The idea was to provide a safe environment in which people could discuss a wide range of topics. Attendees were provided with a stack of cards, each one containing a unique question meant to encourage deep thought and creative verbal expression.

PASSINGS

Leo Michael Boseman



at the Karuvadikupam cremation grounds in Pondicherry, as arranged by his family.

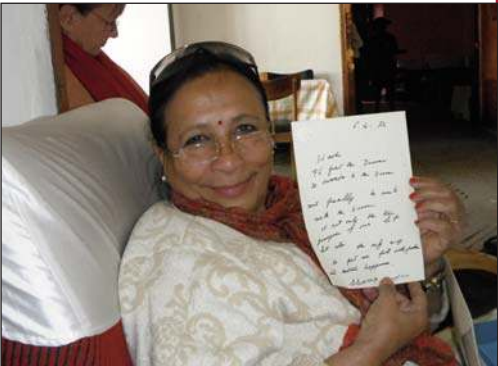
Leo Boseman, who had returned to Auroville a year ago after having lived here in his childhood, met with a road accident on September 22nd and passed away the next day in JIPMER. He was 50 years old and had just started his re-entry process as a "returning Aurovillian".

On September 27th his body was cremated

Hashi Grandcolas

On September 19, Hashi Grandcolas, long-term Indian Friend of Auroville, passed away at Nallam's Clinic in Pondicherry due to heart failure.

Hashi had been an Ashramite in the seventies, managing a guest house and functioning as a captain at the Ashram sports ground, and remained a steadfast sadhika all her life. She lived in Mumbai and Paris, as well as in Auroville and Pondicherry, and was a lively yoga teacher and dedicated painter, as well as good friend of many in the Ashram, Auroville and the Auroville International world. The Sri Aurobindo Ashram took care of her last rites.



Hashi holding a letter from The Mother

International world. The Sri Aurobindo Ashram

About Auroville Today

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